

Clockwise from left:

Sharon Stanis, Joanna Hood,
Pamela Highbaugh Aloni,
Ann Elliott-Goldschmid.



FOUR~PART HARMONY

BY ROBERT MOYES PHOTO BY GARY MCKINSTRY

Victoria's renowned Lafayette String Quartet
celebrates a quarter-century
of music making

IT WAS DRAMATIC, even for Beethoven. When Victoria school trustees voted to cancel elementary schools' string programs a decade ago, 50 musicians staged a performance at Alix Goolden Hall, with the climax being the first movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. The melody unrolled with its surging power but soon began to falter as different string musicians pulled black shrouds over themselves and stopped playing, crippling the orchestra: point brilliantly made.

Front and centre in that historic performance were members of the University of Victoria's internationally famed Lafayette String Quartet, which has been the university's "quartet in residence" since 1991. The quartet went on to establish a mentoring initiative between UVic students and students and teachers in Victoria's public schools. More than a decade later, that mentorship remains as an important credit course at UVic's department of music.

"That generosity in sharing with the community was so very typical of the Lafayette Quartet," says renowned solo-bassist Gary Karr. "It's a reflection of how important music is in their lives." This year, its members are celebrating their 25th year playing together, an exceptional milestone in chamber music.

The quartet includes first violinist Ann Elliott-Goldschmid, violinist Sharon Stanis, violist Joanna Hood, and cellist Pamela Highbaugh Aloni, all of whom are in their early 50s. "They are one of the truly great quartets, not just in Canada but in North America," says Karr.

The group had its origins in Bloomington, Indiana. Hood and Stanis met first, both students of legendary violinist Rostislav Dubinsky, of the Borodin Quartet. "I was the hippie from Seattle and Sharon was the nice Midwestern girl with

cute shoes," laughs Hood. Dubinsky recommended that cellist Highbaugh create a trio. "We formed a 'gig group' to play weddings and such and made pretty good money for students," recalls Stanis.

In 1986 the three aspiring musicians got summer jobs performing in a chamber orchestra in Detroit, meeting the orchestra's concertmaster, Ann Elliott. The newly formed quartet sought further coaching from Dubinsky, going on in 1988 to win the grand prize at the Fischhoff Competition, the world's largest chamber music competition. Other awards followed and the group — named after a famous avenue in Detroit — began attracting serious notice. In 1991 all four were invited to join the UVic School of Music. Five weeks of debate over the move ensued, culminating in a vote via secret ballot. The decision was unanimous, and Victoria became home to these four remarkable musicians.

Now the LSQ is the world's longest-running, all-female string quartet with all-original members. This is a truly remarkable feat, given the short life span of some quartets, which can fall apart because the interpersonal dynamics are so complicated and emotionally fraught.

"We are four people with strong ideas about how things should be," admits Stanis. Hood adds that all of them were "that bossy kid in school who got everyone else to do what they wanted." Not surprisingly, they've had some big fights over the years about repertoire choices and how certain pieces should be performed. "If you are a musician, then playing music is as essential to your life as eating," says Hood. "When you perform with other people, you don't always get to play what you want. These can feel like huge decisions."

Some famous quartets developed such poisonous personal relations that they eventually traveled separately to performances. According to Pacific Opera Victoria artistic director Timothy Vernon, the LSQ comprises "four individually wonderful players who have found a great way to work together." Vernon credits their spirit of cooperation. "Plus they are tuned into the performance moment with a mix of technical fluidity and maturity . . . they're a terrific quartet," he continues. "We're very lucky to have them."

Quartet repertoire requires great musical finesse and a high degree of rapport. It's been compared to a single painting being simultaneously created by four artists. "It's a genre that all composers come to with a certain reverence," says Elliott-Goldschmid. And for the musicians, performance can be sheer joy. "When it all comes together it's like an out-of-body experience . . . you're just flying," Stanis adds.

Possibly because of that intense musical closeness, the Lafayettes don't socialize regularly (in fact, Hood had to call for directions to Stanis' house en route to this interview). "When the quartet started, my attitude was, 'I want to be a good business partner and a good musical partner, but I'm

not interested in being your best friend,' ” explains Hood. “Of course, after 25 years, they are dear friends . . . my musical sisters.”

Their solidarity was aptly demonstrated several years ago when Highbaugh Aloni was diagnosed with breast cancer shortly before the LSQ was due to fly to Berlin to perform the entire cycle of Beethoven string quartets. The invitation was a fantastic honour and the cellist offered to delay her second surgery, but her colleagues wouldn't allow the risk. They cancelled the prestigious gig entirely. “That profound sense

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of support really underlined how we felt about each other,” says Highbaugh Aloni. “It was love in such a beautiful way.”

Pregnancy and motherhood have presented their own challenges over the years, ranging from struggling to play a cello with an enormous belly to touring with babysitting grandparents. “Motherhood is hard on professional musicians,” sighs Elliott-Goldschmid. “Even today the majority of female string players eventually drop out of their chamber groups after they have kids.”

As well as performing about 20 concerts a year as part of a touring schedule, the LSQ also runs the string program at

UVic. They started with a dozen students and now have a full roster of 32, drawn from across the country. Strains of Brahms and Mozart well up in the basement of the MacLaurin Building, where the string students congregate outside the practice rooms in a stretch of hallway they've dubbed String Alley. Although she graduated a decade ago, Mieka Michaux vividly remembers her LSQ teachers. “They were inspiring, they're *really* great role models as musicians,” says Michaux, now a core member of the Victoria Symphony's viola section as well as with several other groups.

Happily ensconced in Victoria, the buoyant and charismatic members of the LSQ are looking at a rosy future. UVic will soon see the debut of a graduate program for string quartet, a first for Canada. A new CD — their ninth — is in process. And several special guests will be joining them for a trio of concerts celebrating their milestone anniversary (look for details in an upcoming *Boulevard* Front Row column). “This will be a year like no other,” grins Elliott-Goldschmid. “And we're going to enjoy every moment of it!” **VB**